

Advertising, Marketing and the Media: Improving Messages

There is great potential for the advertising, media, and entertainment industries to positively portray healthful eating habits and regular physical activity, and thereby help to change social norms about childhood obesity. Public education messages in multiple types of media are needed to generate support for policy changes that contribute to healthy eating and physical activity and to provide important information about obesity to the general public, particularly parents, children, and adolescents.

Advertising to Children and Youth

Children of all ages spend a large amount of their leisure time using a combination of various media, including broadcast television, cable networks, DVDs, video games, computers, the Internet, and cell phones. Exposure to these media affects children's choices and may have a strong influence on their tendency toward increased obesity and chronic disease risk. Television advertising can especially affect children's food and nutrition-related knowledge and purchase decisions, both those made directly and indirectly through parents.

Annual sales of foods and beverages to young consumers exceeded \$27 billion in 2002. Food and beverage advertisers collectively spend \$10 billion to \$12 billion a year to reach children and youth. Of that, more than \$1 billion is spent on media advertising to children, that reaches them primarily through television; more than \$4.5 billion is spent on youth-targeted promotions such as premiums, coupons, sweepstakes, and contests; \$2 billion is spent on youth-targeted public relations; and \$3 billion is spent on packaging designed for children.

Exposure

Although advertising has not been linked directly to childhood obesity, advertisements targeted to children through multiple media channels contribute to children's choices about foods, beverages, and sedentary pursuits. Based on children's commercial recall and

product preferences, it is evident that advertising increases food-purchase requests by children to parents, has an impact on children's product and brand preferences, and affects their consumption behavior.

More than half of television advertisements directed at children promote foods and beverages such as candy, fast food, snack foods, soft drinks, and sweetened breakfast cereals that are high in calories and fat, and low in fiber and other essential nutrients. Young children are uniquely vulnerable to commercial promotion because they lack the skills to understand the difference between information and advertising.

There is not enough evidence of food, beverage, and entertainment advertising's adverse impacts on children to support calling for a ban on all such advertising

KEY FACTS

ADVERTISING AND MARKETING

Industry should develop and strictly adhere to marketing and advertising guidelines that minimize the risk of obesity in children and youth.

The Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services should convene a national conference to develop guidelines for the advertising and marketing of foods, beverages, and sedentary entertainment directed at children and youth with attention to product placement, promotion, and content.

Industry should implement the advertising and marketing guidelines.

The Federal Trade Commission should have the authority and resources to monitor compliance by the food, beverage, and sedentary entertainment industry advertising practices.

to kids. Instead, the committee recommended an approach that is similar to that used for controlling cigarette or alcohol advertising.

Media and Public Education

Use of the mass media is the best way to reach large segments of the population and can be used as a positive strategy for addressing childhood obesity. Media has the power to help change social norms—for youth about their own behavior, for parents about their actions on behalf of their children, and for society at large about the need to support policies that protect its most vulnerable members. Mass media has not often been used to address the problem of childhood obesity, and any efforts to do so should include monitoring and evaluation to assure that the media efforts are achieving the intended goals.

Exploring Similar Media Campaigns

Media campaigns covering a range of public health issues have been targeted to adults or the general public with varying results. Over the past 10 years, government and private groups have undertaken major media campaigns to influence a variety of other youth behaviors, including tobacco use and drug use. Current evidence suggests that the anti-tobacco campaigns have been successful, while the anti-drug campaigns have had less success. Two years ago, the federal government launched the VERB campaign, a multi-ethnic media campaign based on social marketing principles and behavioral change models with the goal of increasing and maintaining physical activity in teens—youth aged 9 to 13 years. While preliminary results are positive, it is too early to tell whether media can effectively increase physical activity among this population of youth.

Nonetheless, a broad multimedia campaign focused on obesity prevention offers the best possibility of reaching a sizeable and broad audience, on a continuing basis, to generate support for policy changes and provide needed information to parents, children and youth.

KEY FACTS

MULTI-MEDIA AND PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) should develop, implement and evaluate a broad-based, long-term national multimedia and public relations campaign focused on obesity prevention in children and youth.

The campaign should be developed in coordination with other federal departments and agencies and with input from independent experts to focus on building support for policy changes; providing information to parents; and providing information to children and youth. Rigorous evaluation should be a critical component.

Reinforcing messages should be provided in diverse media and effectively coordinated with other events and dissemination activities.

The media should incorporate obesity issues into its content, including the promotion of positive role models.